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TO COMMEND THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST.

THE book of Acts, like the other books of the New Testament, was written for the purpose of commending the gospel to those who might read it, or who might be reached by it indirectly. It was the second part of a larger work; the first part was the gospel of Luke. These two books constitute a unit, though this fact is obscured by the insertion of the gospel of John between them in the present arrangement of the New Testament books. Written in the last quarter of the first century A. D., and in the gentile field, the Acts of the Apostles set forth and impressed the larger conception of the gospel which Jesus had taught. One might call the Acts, as one might call each of the four gospels, "a first-century apology for Christianity." They were such, yet the term "apology" does not produce altogether the right idea about them. Their aim was intensely practical. They sought to make men see the superiority of the religious ideas and the moral standards of Christianity.

To make this truth clear was a most difficult task. Gentiles were not easily persuaded that a religion of Jewish origin was for them, and offered them a higher type of religion than their own. The wisdom and energy with which the first Christians commended the gospel to the great Roman world have been matter of wonder from the first century until our own. The book of Acts is one feature of this great evangelistic movement conducted by the followers of

*AN EVANGELISTIC
WRITING*

Christ. The particular method by which Luke commends the gospel to his readers was beyond question the most desirable and the most effective which could have been used at that time. Jesus taught a universal, spiritual gospel during the years of his public ministry. But it remained for his disciples to extend his teaching to gentiles, and to bring into realization its universal and spiritual characteristics. The story of how this was accomplished is the story that the book of Acts tells. And it is told most interestingly and persuasively. The reader of the book could scarcely fail to see the ardent purpose for which the narrative was given, and it would be difficult for him to escape the conclusion that a religion of this kind had a practical significance for himself.

The most remarkable thing in the history of the apostolic age is the progressive apprehension and realization of the higher aspects of Jesus' teaching. It is nothing short of *LUKE'S CONCEPTION OF THE GOSPEL* miraculous that members of the Jewish nation, in whom race pride and exclusiveness reached their extreme development, and who claimed to possess the special and ultimate revelation of God's will, should have been able to abandon these national positions to accept and proclaim a universal, spiritual gospel. Luke, to be sure, was not a Jew; but neither was he the originator of the conception of the gospel which his books present. That conception came from Christ, and was established by the apostle Paul more than by any other. Luke owes his conception of the gospel, so far as we can see, to Paul, with whom he was a fellow-laborer in the gentile field. The gospel and the Acts of Luke are a presentation of the general view of the gospel which obtained in the Pauline churches. Still, Luke had made this conception his own. He was not a mere reporter of others' opinions; he was himself profoundly convinced of the truth of this gospel.

It is most interesting to observe how this true conception of Jesus' teaching made its way in the years that followed his public ministry. The gospel of Matthew was written specifically to set forth the universal, spiritual gospel. The epistle to the Hebrews was written to show the immeasurable superiority of this kind of

a gospel over Judaism and over paganism. The conception of the gospel which we find in Acts is that which came to prevail in the first century by the labors and the writings of those who saw most clearly, and who worked most effectively to give their vision to others.

Various modes of setting forth and commending the gospel were used by the Christians. The argumentative mode, as seen *LUKE'S MODE* in the epistle to the Hebrews, had its value; the *OF PRESENTING* apocalyptic mode, as seen in the book of Revelation, was an attractive way; the epistolary mode, as *THE GOSPEL* seen in the writings of Paul and others, had its special usefulness. But the mode which was preferred above all, and was found to reach the largest number most effectively, was that of the narrative. To tell what Jesus had said and what Jesus had done was found to be the way above every other way for giving the gospel to men. The story, too, of how Jesus' disciples after his ministry carried on his work, communicated his teaching to others, and built up the kingdom which he had introduced, was the most useful method of showing the universal and spiritual conception of Christ in its realization. The history of the public ministry is not recited in the four gospels as a mere chronicle of past events with a historical interest uppermost; rather these things are told for the immediate practical effect upon the reader. So in the book of Acts, the events of the apostolic age are not recited merely as events for the sake of telling what happened in bygone years; rather these events are recited to commend the gospel to the readers of the book, and such a conception of the gospel as the book is written to support.

One of the first things which strike a reader of the Acts of the Apostles is the attention which is given to exhibiting the *GEOGRAPHICAL* territorial expansion of Christianity. The program *SPREAD OF* for that expansion is stated in chap. 1, vs. 8, and *CHRISTIANITY* the carrying out of this program is shown by the narrative of evangelization in one district after another, until the whole gentile world from Jerusalem to Rome had received the gospel. Yet one must not be so shallow a reader as to think

that this geographical spread is narrated simply for its own sake. It is one way in which Luke sets forth the world-conquest of the gospel. Further, territorial expansion was one means by which the gospel became in fact a universal, spiritual religion. To show that it is this was the main object of the book.

The book of Acts also gives glowing descriptions of the work of several men. Among them Peter and Paul were the most distinguished, and the most effective. The title "Acts of the Apostles" applies only in a general way to the contents of the book, since the work of a majority of the Twelve is not recorded, while much is told of persons who were not apostles, especially Stephen and Philip. The purpose of the writer of Acts was not to give a biography of anyone, not even of Peter or Paul. In contrast with this view one might almost say that it was the author's intention to write a biography of the gospel of Christ. But the narrative is not told with a biographical interest or aim to the front; it is told to show the true conception of the gospel, and to commend this to the reader for his acceptance.

That the Acts is not a biography of Peter or Paul appears the moment one considers how much the Acts fails to tell us about these two men. When Peter disappears from the Acts' history after chap. 15, it is not because Peter's activity ceases at that time, but because the development of Christianity passed from the Jewish field and Peter's hands into the gentile field and into the hands of the apostle Paul. So when we reach the close of Acts and are surprised to find no record of the outcome of Paul's Roman trial or of his death, these things are not told because the author is not writing a biography of Paul. Having shown the establishment of the universal, spiritual gospel in Rome, the great capital of the empire, by a two-years' unhindered evangelization of Paul, he has accomplished the purpose with which he set out, namely, to commend the gospel in its largest and best conception by showing how this conception had been actually wrought out in the first generation of the Christian movement.

One might rashly judge that a book written in the first century to commend Christianity to its contemporaries would have little value for the twentieth century as an apology for Christianity. Would not the point of view, the methods used, and the features of the time so condition the book that it would have little practical value for any day but its own? Just here lies the peculiar character of the Acts, and of the New Testament books as a collection. They have so far escaped the limitations and the superficial characteristics of their time as to be books for every century. It was the divine inspiration, of which we speak so much, that gave them these qualities of permanent value. The book of Acts, like the gospels and the epistles, still presents Christianity in a way to reach the largest number in the most impressive way. One cannot even now find a better method than that of telling vividly the gospel story, and the story of the life and work of the first Christians, as a means of commending the gospel to the hearts and minds of men. Is it not true that we fail to make all the use we might of the book of Acts for persuading men of the intrinsic superiority and the power for universal victory which lie in the gospel of Christ?

APOLOGETIC

VALUE OF LUKE'S

WRITINGS

FOR TODAY